

A Year After Raids, Asia Week New York Returns to the Spotlight

New York's salute to the vibrant arts of Asia is a 10-day festival full of ancient treasures and contemporary masterworks that is in its eighth year.

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL and TOM MASHBERG MARCH 5, 2017

It's New York's salute to the vibrant arts of Asia, a 10-day festival where visitors admire or acquire ancient treasures and contemporary masterworks displayed in lustrous galleries, auction houses and museums. Now in its eighth year, Asia Week New York, which begins on Thursday, has blossomed into a kind of high-culture pub crawl where international and local exhibitors showcase fine art from all corners of Asia, and museums and others stage special events.

This year more than 50 vendors are participating — the most ever — but organizers are still mindful that a year ago, federal officials and the Manhattan district attorney's office raided several dealers during a crackdown on antiquities smuggling. They seized eight items and later charged one of the Asian art market's leading figures with trafficking in stolen goods.

The vast majority of dealers and auction houses were not implicated, however, and they are looking forward to displaying a cornucopia of traditional and modern works, including porcelain, jewelry, textiles, paintings, ceramics, sculpture, bronzes, prints, photographs and jades.

Lark E. Mason Jr., chairman of the nonprofit consortium that runs the event, said that while there is some concern about additional raids this year, he emphasized

that his membership is law-abiding and cooperates with the authorities. “Our community is for transparency and excellence and against trafficking and any illegal activities,” he said.

A Week Interrupted by Raids

Last year’s seizures were a setback for the festival, for which reported sales dropped to \$130 million, from \$360 million the year before.

Agents from Homeland Security Investigations confiscated two items from Christie’s after linking them to a longtime Manhattan Asian art dealer, Subhash Kapoor, who the authorities have said ran the largest antiquities smuggling network to operate in the United States. Mr. Kapoor, a onetime Asia Week exhibitor, has been in jail in India since 2012, awaiting trial on smuggling charges there.

Three other dealers were also raided during Asia Week last year.

“Those who peddle historic relics with no consideration for how they were acquired are active participants in the laundering of stolen property,” said the Manhattan district attorney, Cyrus R. Vance Jr., whose office has been leading the investigations. “It is not only unethical, but unlawful.”

Mr. Mason said that he and his colleagues would rather work with law enforcement at the outset, trying to identify potentially looted items, before there is a need for raids. “If they found issues with someone and an object, it gives us an opportunity to be supportive, but do it in a way that doesn’t undercut good actors,” he said.

Mr. Vance said that he welcomed cooperative efforts.

“Experts and academics can be especially adept at identifying long-lost pieces of ancient art or recognizing the signs of trafficking, which can include a lack of documentation, unverified ownership claims or the sudden appearance of an item in a commercial marketplace after a period of concealment,” he said. “They share our responsibility to act by reporting potential thefts to authorities.”

A Dealer Remains Under Scrutiny

Nancy Wiener and her mother, Doris, who died in 2011, were long the doyennes of New York's Asian art scene. They were highly successful dealers, major players in Asia Week and benefactors to American and foreign museums. But last year, Nancy Wiener's gallery was the site of one of the raids, where the authorities seized three items, together valued at \$1 million, and confiscated thousands of documents and emails.

In a felony complaint filed in December, a Manhattan prosecutor, Matthew Bogdanos, and a Homeland Security agent, Brenton Easter, accused Ms. Wiener of dealing in stolen artifacts since 1999. She is awaiting trial and is not a listed participant this year in Asia Week. But one of her lawyers, Michael McCullough, said the gallery would be open. "Ms. Wiener has every reason to expect a favorable conclusion to the case," he said.

Nayef Homsy, a vendor accused in 2015 of possessing and selling three stolen statues, is exhibiting this year, though he is still facing charges he and his gallery at the time received nearly \$500,000 in the sales of the antiquities that the district attorney says were stolen from temples in India and Nepal. Last October, he paid a judgment of \$495,065 to settle civil charges that the district attorney said were separate from the pending criminal case. Mr. Mason of Asia Week said that Mr. Homsy was allowed back in because "my understanding is there was no admission of guilt." Mr. Homsy did not respond to calls to his gallery.

A Focus on the Finest

This Asia Week is a celebratory milestone for one participant, Joan B. Mirviss, a dealer with her own gallery at 39 East 78th Street in Manhattan. She traces her interest in Japanese art to a television show on ink painting that enthralled her as a child in Connecticut. She opened her gallery in 1977. "This is my 40th year," said Ms. Mirviss, who deals in traditional and contemporary Japanese art, not antiquities, and speaks Japanese. "Nothing I have has ever been in the ground or in a temple," she added.

Ms. Mirviss was one of the founding exhibitors of the International Asian Art Show, which used to operate out of the Park Avenue Armory and later merged with Asia Week.

Among her prize offerings this year is an asymmetrical spherical stoneware vessel about 20 inches in diameter formed of ropy lines evoking the sea. Entitled “Listening to the Waves,” it was created for her anniversary show by the artist Sakiyama Takayuki, whom Ms. Mirviss met at a pottery show almost 20 years ago and then tracked down to his remote rural studio in Japan.

“Something about this man’s work is so camera-friendly,” she said.

“Listening to the Waves” has already been sold to a collector for \$20,000, but it will be on display.

Things of Beauty, Old and New

Another item of note that will be on view is a hanging ink silk scroll, about 9½-foot tall and 6-foot across, titled “Silver Pheasants Under Spring Blossoms,” by Ye Shuangshi. The scroll, from around the late-15th to 16th century, will be on display at Kaikodo, 74 East 79th Street in Manhattan.

The artist, a nephew of the master Lu Ji, used a vivid blue and a host of birds and flowers to conjure Taoist fairylands of eternal happiness. The gallery’s director, Carol Conover, a former director at Sotheby’s, said its price was \$300,000.

“Kaikodo” means “The Hall of Preserving Antiquity” in Japanese and Chinese. It is the gallery of Howard and Mary Ann Rogers, art professors who began collecting in the 1980s and publishing a rich library of scholarly monographs.

What to See This Year

A prime feature of Asia Week New York is the open house atmosphere at galleries and museums in and around the city.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has several Asian-themed exhibitions, including “Show and Tell: Stories in Chinese Painting,” featuring about 100 works from the 12th century forward that demonstrate different modes of pictorial narrative, and “An Artist of Her Time: Y. G. Srimati and the Indian Style,” which features 25 watercolors by the Indian artist Y. G. Srimati (1926-2007).

Other highlights include:

- An exhibition of memorabilia by Isamu Noguchi made while he was interned in Arizona during World War II (Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, Queens).
- Musical Arts of Asia (Newark Museum, New Jersey).
- “The Movement of Herstory: Korean Embroidery” (Korean Cultural Center New York, Manhattan).
- Buddhist sculpture from ancient China (J. J. Lally, Manhattan).
- “Secrets of the Sea: A Tang Shipwreck and Early Trade in Asia” (Asia Society Museum, Manhattan).
- An exhibition by the Japanese Art Dealers Association, Saturday to March 13, will feature a 14th-century “sleeping lamp stand,” or nemuri today, made of lacquered wood and metalwork. It shows three children at their studies, one of whom has drifted off to sleep (Ukrainian Institute of America, Manhattan).

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